ENJOY, ENJOY!

April 24, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 15:1-11

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." -John 15:11 (RSV)

The year was 1643. Charles I of England had been executed. Oliver Cromwell, the Protector, a Protestant Calvinist, had assumed authority in the place of the crown. Parliament called an assembly of church leaders together at Westminster - nearly all of them Calvinist, Puritans in their leanings - and told them to produce a new statement of faith and church structure for all of Great Britain. That remarkable assembly produced the Westminster Confession of Faith, and two question-and-answer documents to interpret the Confession called the Larger Cathechism and the Shorter Catechism.

The delegates at Westminster began at the beginning. The first question in the Shorter Catechism is "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer: " Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

It doesn't have a thing to do with the rest of the sermon but a sense of Presbyterian order requires that we bring our brief historical excursion to a conclusion. Yes, for a brief period of time all of Britain was Calvinist-Presbyterian. But not long. The monarchy was restored shortly thereafter. Charles II assumed the throne, the Church of England was re-established and the work of the Westminster Assembly - the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms - became the property of the Scots who found it all quite agreeable. England resumed being Anglican: The Church of Scotland became truly Presbyterian, and the work of the Assembly was the theological standard of Presbyterism, until we expanded our horizons with a new Book of Confessions in 1967.

And that is how it is that some three hundred years later, many of us here were still memorizing the Shorter Catechism. The way you used to become a member of the Presbyterian Church was to go to Communicants' Class during Junior High. (We didn't use the word "Confirmation" back then. That's what happened to our Catholic friends.) In any event the Communicants' Class requirements in those days were fairly simple...

memorize the Shorter Cathechism. I did so dutifully but without enthusiasm or comprehension: went once a week for six weeks after school, met with the minister and recited the questions and answers I was in the process of memorizing, satisfied the Session of my church that I had enough 17th Century Calvinism in my head to be called a Presbyterian, and then promptly and thoroughly flushed my mind of the entire business.

Three hundred years after Westminster I memorized and forgot the entire Shorter Catechism in the space of six weeks - with the exception of the first question and answer. I remember what may be the most important assertion those crusty old Calvinists made; certainly the most provocative. My guess is that there are some here who became Presbyterians the way I did. And that if you memorized it you forgot it all too, except the first one... so let's shine now -

Question: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

"to enjoy God" - Did they really mean that? Was it truly their intent to propose that the very purpose of human life is that it be lived in a relationship with God characterized essentially by enjoyment? We could, of course, inquire into their definition of joy. We could assume that a 17th century British Calvinist and a 20th century American Presbyterian might come up with different ideas about joy and enjoyable activity. We might find them a little dour. On the other hand, they might wonder about our paying to sit in a cold drizzle on a windy day and watch the Cubs lose. In spite of the differences, I want to assume that they had their steady gaze and reasonable intellects locked on a very important idea: that the essence of Christian experience is to enjoy God.

After all, they were reflecting a major and consistent biblical theme. Earlier we read together from Psalm 47...

"Clap your hands, all peoples!
Shout to God with loud shouts of joy."
(Psalm 47:1)

The prophet, writing about the return of the exiles...

"So the Lord's people shall come back,
set free, and enter Zion with shouts of
triumph, crowned with everlasting joy:
joy and gladness shall overtake them."
(Isaiah 51:11)

Five centuries later... " when the wise men saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." (Matthew 2:10)

"And the angel said to the shepherds,
'Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you
good news of a great joy which shall come
to all people.'" (Luke 2:10)

One of the most moving and powerful incidents is described in our lesson this morning from the section in John's Gospel known as the "Farwell Discourses." The setting is the table of the Last Supper. The sense of the end is clear. He knew it was their last meal together. He told them the allegory of the Vine and underscored the fact that their relationship with God was through him. He told them he loved them and that they would continue to live in that love in the future. And then he said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." [John 15:11] Then three days later...

"So they departed quickly from the tomb
with fear and great joy." [Matthew 28:8]

And later, still, St. Paul, writing about the new life in Christ...

"For the Kingdom of God is... righteousness
and peace and joy."

At the heart of the biblical witness is something so profoundly good that the only appropriate human response is joy... joy first and last... not penitence, reverence, guilt, but joy. The Bible is the story of people who have heard and experienced that goodness down through the centuries and have responded joyfully.

We live in a time when it is not easy to be joyful. Our perceptions of the world are shaped, in large measure, by what we read in the newspaper and see on television. And, it is the nature of media news to tell us about the abnormal, the tragic and violent: how many houses burned down, how many murders were committed, how many officials committed fraud and how many ships were hit with missiles in the Persian Gulf. The last thing religion ought to do is cover the fact that we live in a dangerous, often violent and tragic world. In fact, good religion ought to keep us sensitive to the truth about the world in which we live. And it is not a world which allows for superficial joy.

It is significant that when this church offers a series of seminars at 7:00 a.m. in the Loop on the topic "Am I Having Fun Yet," lots of us show up. The reason is that we live a life characterized by stress - high stress. Stress related illness is a major health threat. We work hard to get ahead, to be successful, to achieve our goals and the commensurate rewards the system promises and joy, frankly, sounds - irresponsible, frivolous. We haven't time for it... maybe someday, but at the moment we're far too busy getting ahead. Even our play seems grimly determined and goal oriented.

So maybe those old Calvinists knew something we have forgotten. Maybe they had a perspective about our humanity - that we very much need to hear.

We weren't born to be unhappy. It doesn't take long in the presence of a baby to observe that human beings are made with the capacity for great joy. I like to think that when the Westminster Divines concluded that the chief end of humankind is to enjoy God, it was because enough of them were

fathers or uncles or grandfathers to have seen it. (Unfortunately there were no women in the Assembly. If there had been, the Westminster Confession might not have been quite so severe). I like to think that while their stern intellectual Calvinsim was urging them to articulate the corruptibility of the flesh and the depravity of the soul, they had held and patted and played with enough babies to know that corruptibility and depravity are not the whole story... that holding a baby feels pretty good and it is a reciprocally joyful experience.

There is no essay as eloquent on the topic of joy as a young child, lost in play; a little girl on a swing, a little boy running.

An article in Psychology Today on children's ideas of God reported that until the age of four to six - children associate God with play and gaiety. An eight year old said to the interviewer, "I don't know if this is what you're asking, but I feel closest to God, like after I've rounded second when I hit a double." ["The Children's God," David Heller, Psychology Today, December, 1985.]

Besides, now we know that joy is good for us. Norman Cousins found that laughing reduced his pain, and we're learning why. We've discovered that laughing (and crying, by the way) stimulates the thymus gland which regulates brain chemicals called endomorphins, whose function apparently is to help us cope with pain and hurt. [See "Humor as Healing and Grace," Philip A. Anderson, Chicago Theological Seminary Register, Spring 1987]

James Cavanaugh, priest become poet, wrote (about himself) -

"Little boy, I miss you, with your sudden
smile...

...You walked in life and devoured it
...without anything but misty goals to keep
you company.

When did you lose your eyes and ears:
When did taste buds cease to tremble:
Whence this sullenness, this mounting fear,
this quarrel with life-demanding meaning?"
[There Are Men Too Gentle to Live Among
Wolves]

Is it necessary that life become a quarrel: that our pilgrimage be a struggle for meaning, a grim battle to be fought, a solemn venture with no time wasted on joy? The Christian answer would seem to be "no" - life does not have to be like that. In fact, the fundamental truth we celebrate is fundamentally joyful, joyful in spite of what else is going on. Our chief end, regardless of what else we do in life, is to enjoy God. You might assume, that is to say, that the one consistently joyful place in our society might be the Christian church. And the one thing you could always count on finding there, in striking contrast to the world around it, is some joy.

How very unfortunate that the reverse is often the case, that the Christian religion appears to be somehow, somber, serious, grim, grave. We Presbyterians, particularly, suffer from a bad press on the topic. Novelists often use "Presbyterian" as a synonym for stuffy, sober, tight-lipped piety. A campus pastor friend of mine used to say, only partly facetiously, that if a stranger from another planet stumbled into most of the Presbyterian churches he knew, he'd conclude that someone had died and the funeral was in process.

The reason is that the Christian church, early on in its history, started thinking more like the Greeks - in whose world they were living - than the Hebrews from whose world they came. The Greeks taught that the purpose of religion was to move a person from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the spirit. Theologically, Greeks were uncomfortable with the lusty, life-affirming posture of the Jews who gladly affirmed that creation is God's and therefore good. The Greeks were suspicious of physical pleasure, joy... And in the hands of some early Christian theologians, influenced by Greek philosophy, the religious life was one of self-denial, celibacy, fasting and mortification of the flesh for the glory of God. Some would say we've been doing it - fasting and mortifying the flesh and looking as grave as possible ever since - theoretically and liturgically.

Professor Conrad Hyers, in a fine new book, And God Created Laughter, observed that "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Jesus and Paul - is imagined to be totally humorless, infinite in gravity..." (p. 4) "The overwhelming bias has been to associate God and religion primarily with the serious side, preferably our most serious moments. We see ourselves as most religious and reverential, if not a little godlike, when we are at our dreariest and dullest." (p. 14)

Hyers remembers a comedian on the Johnny Carson Show who said what he liked about the Catholic Church was that the Eucharist was called a "celebration" and the priest a "celebrant": but he was still waiting, he said, since it's really supposed to be a celebration, for a priest in the middle of the liturgy to say, "Whoopee!"

A little more relevantly, Professor Joseph Sittler on the topic, holds the church responsible... church architecture in fact, for the "gravity of glorifying the holy."

Sittler found most American churches either "clean, shadowless and antiseptic or monumentally melancholy."

Sittler had a great sense of aesthetics - in art and in language. Listen to this...

"Our traditional churches," he said, "affirm a heavy kind of solemnity that leaves us indeed with a lugubrious holy, but defenseless and aghast before the joy, for instance, of a baroque church. Such a church is luxuriant joy - breathing, positively Mozartean in its vivacity - replete with rosy angels trembling in unabashed enjoyment among impossibly fleecy clouds against an incredibly blue heaven." [The Care of the Earth, p. 94]

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C. S. Lewis, in The Screwtape Letters, a correspondence between a senior and junior devil on the topic of winning a man's soul, has the senior devil observe that pleasure is God's invention - and that joy is its result, which is expressed in the detestable art humans call music and occurs in heaven. Laughter - the devil says - is "disgusting and a direct insult to the realism, dignity and austerity of Hell." [p. 57-58, The Screwtape Letters]

And Olive Ann Burns whose wonderful first novel, Cold Sassy Tree, I quoted two weeks ago, deals with it too. Cold Sassy Tree is the fictional name of a Georgia town in 1906. Grandpa E. Rucker Blakeslee has married a beautiful young woman just three weeks after his wife died and scandalized the whole town. His new wife has received an unkind letter indicating she is not welcome at church. So Grandpa decides that they'll stay home - have church in the living room. He tells his stunned grandson about the irreverent sermon he preached - and then...

"When I finished preachin, she brought in some lemonade and poundcake and I said it was the best Lord's supper I ever et, and she didn't like me sayin' that one bit. Said it was blasphemy. When I wanted to sing some barbershop harmony, she called it sacrilegious, bein' Sunday, but finely I got her goin' on the pi-ana and we had us a real good time. Ev'ry church ought to do that - give God a good time stead of po-mouthin' and always be astin' Him to save us from temptation, and sufferin' and death." [Cold Sassy Tree, p. 189]

Now, we are not going to say "whoopee" during communion, and it is safe to assume that we are not going to have barbershop harmony in the choir loft, and, if we "give God a good time," it will be with Presbyterian dignity, and the harmonies will be by J. S. Bach. We will continue in our orderly reverential ways of worship, but may we be reminded that at the heart of it all is an assertion so incredible that laughing - or weeping for joy - is the only way to respond to it. May we be reminded that the news we celebrate is good.

It is not sad news. It is not even ambiguous news. It is this. There is a God who has created us, a God who likes what he created. A God who loves us and who wants us to be full and joyful and alive. A God who demonstrated that love in the birth and life and death of an only Son, and who then won a victory over that most joyless and saddest portent of all - death. Jesus, son of God, is risen. We are safe. In his resurrected presence we are free. Nothing in life can hurt us because nothing, we now know, can ever separate us from God's love.

If you have never heard that Good News before, hear it now.

If you have heard it before but don't quite believe it, try it on, believe it and see how it feels.

And if you have heard it before and believe it but don't quite know what to do with it, entertain a new thought this morning: namely that Christian faith begins somewhere deep in our hearts - where each of us has a capacity, a capability, perhaps protected, barricaded, disguised -

certainly under-used... It is where the joy in us -- or the joy that could be in us -- resides.

And now I'm going to ask you to do something I've wanted to do ever since the first time I walked into this building: Keeping in mind Dr. Sittler's comments about antiseptic and melancholy church buildings, I'd like you to look up at the ceiling over you. It's not easy to see. There's an accumulation of dirt up there and we don't have lights to illuminate it. But over our heads there is a celebration going on - a riot of color and design and intricate ornamentation, and -- a cacophony of beautiful, joyful music. Angels praising God with trumpets and flutes and harps and tambourines and strings and pipes and cymbals - imagine that? Loud crashing cymbals up there while you're down here saying your prayers.

The people who built it designed it that way. I think they knew the Shorter Catechism. We gather beneath it every week. We come into this space to marry our young and bury our dead, to baptize our infants and to bring our lives into God's presence. And over us is a blessed celebration, a joyful, colorful, beautiful expression of joy.

What is our chief end? Our highest and best purpose? Our fullest humanity? Our holiest vocation?

I believe they meant it. I believe it is truth. Our chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy God forever.